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STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

THE RED RIVER CAMPAIGN: AN ANALYSIS

BY

LIEUTENANT COLONEL STEPHEN G. VISCO
United States Air Force

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ABSTRACT

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This study analyzes Union operations, and touches on Confederate responses, during the Red River Campaign led by Major General Nathaniel Banks beginning in March 1864. The Red River Campaign's ultimate defeat for Union forces can be attributed to many reasons—some political, some military. The Union hoped to control that part of Louisiana and establish a foothold in Texas. It was thought that a joint operation with land and river-borne forces would be most successful. Modern officers schooled in "jointness" would recognize the military, geographic, and command deficiencies of this operation and would not make the same mistakes today.

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THE RED RIVER CAMPAIGN: AN ANALYSIS

There is a faint attempt to make a victory out of this, but two or three such victories would cost us our existence.

- Rear Admiral David D. Porter, USN, commenting on the Red River Campaign¹

The Red River Campaign—as planned and executed—was doomed from the start. An inadequate commander and command structure, geography, politics and personality conflicts all spelled defeat for Major General Nathaniel Banks, USA. Even with the help provided him from other Union Western commands and the limited resources of the Confederates, Banks could not overcome the many challenges presented him.

STRATEGIC SETTING

From the very beginning of the Civil War, Union forces had the advantage of resources and manpower over the Confederate States. The North could "afford" to lose men and equipment, but every loss on the Confederate side would slowly add up to defeat. By the time the Red River Campaign began in mid-March 1864, the war had been fought for nearly three years.

Union

Despite misfortunes of General Banks' Department of the Gulf in the second half of 1863, by the beginning of 1864, the tide had begun to change for all Union forces. All through 1863 there were victories in the Western Theater, and the emergence of a new fighter, Major General Ulysses S. Grant. To the east, Major General George G. Meade had defeated Southern forces at Gettysburg, and then held off the Confederates for the rest of the year.

Major General Banks' previous attempts to gain a foothold in Texas were unsuccessful. After the sieges and eventual fall of Vicksburg and Port Hudson in July 1863, Banks' forces moved up the Sabine River via the Gulf of Mexico and were horribly repulsed. Banks then contemplated moving west over land (about 300 hundred miles). He realized going across a dry, barren prairie in summer, followed by plenty of water and no roads during the winter, would not be the best plan of attack. Banks again took to the sea in late October and was successful in occupying the coastal areas. However, this was not satisfactory with the people in Washington.²

Overall, US forces (land and river-borne) were strong in numbers, well fed, and well supplied throughout the Union, compared to the Confederates. However, textile mills were in

short supply of cotton, and more spindles were dropping out of the production process every day.³

There was no true coordinated strategy for the Union at the beginning of 1864. But there would be shortly.

Confederate

The summer of 1863 would bring "The High-Water Mark of the Confederacy" on a Pennsylvania battlefield. The defeated Confederate Army retreated to Virginia, rested and were again defeated at Bristoe Station. In the west, Vicksburg fell as Lee retreated to Virginia, and there were other defeats and commanders were shuffled once again. The Confederacy and its forces in the field continued to be short of rations and other supplies, as well as troops, especially in the Western Theater. There were three vessels along the Red River, and little other river-borne forces to speak of.⁴

The Confederate strategy was to defend whatever they had, and to seize and hold as much as they could in the North and Free States.⁵

MILITARY PERSONALITIES

UNION FORCES

Major General Henry Halleck

General Halleck was a career officer who authored a "Report on the Means of National Defence" and translated some of Jomini's works. He served within military governments in California and Mexico, and worked on coastal fortifications on both coasts. He resigned in 1854, became a lawyer, led a principal law firm, and refused a seat in the US Senate and on the California State Supreme Court. He then had a successful stint in business and publishing. He was appointed a major general at the outset of the Civil War at the request of General Winfield Scott. No one (except Scott presumably) had a high opinion of Halleck's talents. A good administrator, he also benefited from the successes of his subordinates, namely Ulysses Grant. In the field however, he moved slowly. Lincoln made him "general in chief" in July 1862, and served in that position until Grant was given command of all the armies in March 1864. At that point, Halleck became chief of staff.⁶

Major General Ulysses Grant

Grant attended West Point, excelled at horsemanship, and graduated 21/39 in 1843. He served honorably during the Mexican War both in the field and as quartermaster. He then served in the Midwest, and was transferred to California. In California, he became depressed at

being away from his family, had problems with his commanding officer, and took to drinking. He resigned in 1854 and had marginal success (at best) in a variety of endeavors, including farming, real estate, and as a store clerk. In June 1861 he was appointed a colonel of Illinois volunteers and was quickly promoted to brigadier general. He worked closely with the Navy, had successes in the west, namely Forts Donelson and Henry, Shiloh, Vicksburg, Chattanooga, Lookout Mountain, and Missionary Ridge, and was promoted again.⁷

At the beginning of 1864, Grant found himself as the Commander, Military Division of the Mississippi. Halleck wrote to Grant on 8 January, "The main object of organizing the troops in the western theater...into military departments and placing them under your orders is to give you the general military control and...relieve you from the burden of official correspondence and office duty...(which) enables you to give your full attention to military operation." However, Banks' Department of the Gulf was a separate organization reporting to Halleck. Grant never saw the need to embark on a campaign west when he thought the army should be concentrating to the east to defeat the fielded Confederate Armies.

Because he succeeded in the Western Theater, Grant found himself being considered for promotion and a move east. After Grant pledged he had no political aspirations to run for national office, his nomination as lieutenant general and commander of all armies was forwarded to Congress.¹⁰ He received a dispatch from Halleck on 3 March directing him to report to Washington.¹¹

Major General William Sherman

Sherman also attended West Point, graduated sixth in 1840, started out unexceptionally, and served mostly in California. He resigned in 1853 and began a career in banking, and then law. In 1859 he became the superintendent of a military academy in Alexandria, Louisiana and was asked to receive arms surrendered by the US arsenal at Baton Rouge in early 1861. He refused, resigned as superintendent, and was shortly appointed a colonel in the Union Army. He fought at First Manassas, was appointed brigadier general, and headed west. He was at Shiloh, campaigned against Vicksburg (where he worked successfully with Admiral Porter), and also helped at Chattanooga. ¹²

In early 1864, Sherman commanded the Department of the Tennessee, under Grant. He completed a successful expedition to Meridian, Mississippi, and then tried to coordinate the details about the Red River Campaign and prepared his command for the movement east discussed with Grant. Sherman took over for Grant and assumed command of the Military Division of the Mississippi on 18 March.¹³

Major General Nathaniel Banks

Banks was a lawyer and career politician. After seven attempts, he was elected to the Massachusetts legislature, then served as speaker, and was elected to congress, where he served as Speaker of the House (after 133 ballots!). He was then elected governor of Massachusetts, served about two years, and was appointed a major general of volunteers in January 1861 by Lincoln. He contributed immeasurably in recruiting, morale, raising money and as a propaganda piece for the Union. He was defeated in the Shenandoah Valley (facing Major General Taylor), at Cedar Mountain, and again at Port Hudson. At the beginning of 1864, he commanded the Department of the Gulf, including the Nineteenth Army Corps. As a politician, Banks was very involved in the political aspects of re-establishing the area under Union control, including establishing pro-Union governments and holding elections.

Major General Frederick Steele

A career Army officer, Steele graduated in the same class as Grant from West Point. He was posted to New York and Michigan, and then served well in the Mexican War. He served as an infantry officer in California, Minnesota, Nebraska, and Kansas. When the Civil War began, he commanded a battalion at Wilson's Creek, was advanced to colonel and brigadier general, and was successful in the Western Theater. He was promoted again and commanded a division during Vicksburg. Steele was then given command of the Department of Arkansas, and cleared the state of Rebels aiding Confederate operations. He captured Little Rock in September 1863. Besides military aspects of his command, he too was overseeing elections, in Arkansas.

Brigadier General Andrew Smith

Another career officer, he graduated from West Point in 1838 and served all over the west with the dragoons. At the beginning of the Civil War he was commissioned a colonel of the 2nd California Cavalry, but resigned to become chief of cavalry under Halleck. He was appointed a brigadier general in 1862. He served as a division commander under Sherman, including the Vicksburg Campaign. At the beginning of 1864, he was still serving under Sherman.¹⁶

Rear Admiral David Porter

Porter came from a career Navy family and started his own US naval service in 1829. He began the Civil War in command of a ship participating in a joint effort to relieve Fort Pickens on the Gulf of Mexico, near the Alabama/Florida border. He remained in the Gulf region and assumed command of the Mississippi Squadron in October 1862. He was instrumental in

cooperating with the Army throughout the Mississippi River Basin, and its tributaries, and was key to many Union successes in the West.¹⁷

CONFEDERATE ARMY

Lieutenant General E. Kirby Smith

Kirby Smith was a successful Confederate general who was given command of the Trans-Mississippi Department. Made a Lieutenant General for his part in the invasion of Kentucky the previous year, he was intelligent, but lacked good "field-sense." He developed a strong governmental administration in his department and was very resourceful, including "trading" cotton—even with the Union—to build up arms and supplies for the Confederate Army in "Kirbysmithdom." Smith wrote a letter to his subordinate, Major General Richard Taylor, and to President Davis, that he believed the Red River was "the true lines of operation for an invading column, and that we may expect an attempt to be made... before the waters fall." Although very independent, his command was isolated, and did very little to help the Confederacy. His headquarters was in Shreveport.

Major General Richard Taylor

The son of President Zachary Taylor (who was a career Army officer), and brother of Jeff Davis' first wife, Taylor served as a military secretary during the Mexican War, then became a farmer in Louisiana, and then a politician. He was appointed a colonel at the beginning of the Civil War, fought at First Manassas, was promoted, served under Stonewall Jackson during the 1862 Valley Campaign, was promoted again, and then fought in the Seven Days battles. He was appointed to command the District of West Louisiana in the summer of 1862.²⁰

WHO'S IDEA WAS IT, AND WHY?

Much discussion has centered on who exactly ordered the Red River Campaign.

Certainly, from a military standpoint, it did not make sense. The Western Theaters for both the Union and the Confederacy were of little importance by this time. For the Union, enough decisive victories had been won and it was time to start moving east. The main action was towards the east—the standing armies and capitals—for both armies. West of the Mississippi there was few resources (except cotton) and little that could have an impact on either the Union's or Confederate's center of gravity. Many Confederates even believed the attack would come to the east toward Mobile.²¹

But back as early as the summer of 1863, President Lincoln wrote to Secretary of War Seward, "Can we not renew the effort to organize a force to go to Western Texas? Please

consult with the General-in-Chief on the subject...I believe no local object is now more desirable." Many speculated that France, at the time occupying a portion of Mexico, was eager to gain some ground in Texas.²²

No doubt, many others influenced Lincoln. Major General George McClellan suggested a movement up the Red River into Western Texas to capitalize on favorable Union sentiment in August 1861. By late 1861, the Navy was planning such a move and briefed Lincoln on it. Major General Benjamin Butler suggested a campaign into Texas to Secretary of War Stanton in early 1862. Additionally, manufacturers and state politicians from the northeast pressed Washington in late 1862 to occupy areas where cotton was abundant. Major newspapers in the North also jumped on the bandwagon.²³

Many letters between Banks, Halleck, and Seward during 1863 and early 1864 refer to defending the United States, in Texas, from any enemies.²⁴ Halleck clearly preferred a move up the Red River to any other option (including the coastal assault Banks adopted) as indicated in this August 1863 letter:

In my opinion, neither Indianola nor Galveston {on the Texas coast} is the proper point of attack. If it be necessary, as urged by Mr. Seward, that the flag be restored to some one point in Texas, that can be best and most safely effected by a combined military and naval movement up the Red River to Alexandria, Natchitoches, or Shreveport, and the military occupation of Northern Texas. This would be merely carrying out the plans proposed to you at the beginning of the campaign, and, in my opinion, far superior in its military character to the occupation of Galveston or Indianola. Nevertheless, your choice is left unrestricted.

In the first place, by adopting the line of the Red River, you retain your connection with your own base, and separate still more the two points of the rebel Confederacy. Moreover, you cut Northern Louisiana and Southern Arkansas entirely off from supplies and re-enforcements from Texas. They are already cut off from the rebel States east of the Mississippi.

If you occupy Galveston or Indianola, you divide your own troops, and enable the enemy to concentrate all of his forces upon either of these points or on New Orleans.

I write this as a suggestion and not as a military instruction.²⁵

From a purely naval standpoint, there was a Confederate ship building operation at Shreveport; but that reason alone would not necessitate an operation up the sometime treacherous, and well defended Red River.²⁶

From Banks' perspective, he realized he would gain a fair amount of glory and gratitude if he could deliver Shreveport for the presidential election that fall. And, President Lincoln might

look favorably on him if he decided to run for national office four years later himself. There were also some textile factories in the area supplying the Confederate Army, as well as an estimated 200,000 to 300,000 bales of cotton.²⁷

GEOGRAPHY

There were many accounts of the poor geography around the Red River Basin, all of which were known to Union (and Confederate) commanders at all levels. Sherman, having lived in Alexandria for some time, was very aware.

Specifically, there were few plantations, and even fewer settlements, because of the dense pine forest. There were few roads, and those that did exist were narrow. There was little water and no forage for animals or men.²⁸ Therefore, everything the Army needed in supplies would have to be carried in (over those narrow roads) for the duration of the campaign.

ORGANIZATION

As already discussed, Major General Banks commanded the Department of the Gulf, and he would command the Red River Campaign. He reported to Halleck. He employed forces from Department of Arkansas (Steele) and Army of the Tennessee (Sherman), both under Grant. Admiral Porter was an independent naval element (Mississippi Squadron) which operated in and around the Mississippi River and the Gulf of Mexico. He reported to Gideon Welles, the Secretary of the Navy.

PUTTING THE PLAN TOGETHER

Halleck wrote to Banks on 4 January to lay out the campaign in general terms: Steele's force would move south from Arkansas, Grant would send whatever he can to support, cooperate with the Navy, and correspond to all concerned to come up with the best plan.²⁹

Also on 4 January, Sherman wrote to Grant, "Red River too low to admit the expedition to Shreveport...I am satisfied we have troops enough to take Shreveport if we can get up the Red River, which the admiral (Porter) thinks impossible."³⁰ Again on 6 Jan, Sherman reported that the Red River was too low to navigate.³¹

Early in January, Halleck also wrote to several commanders who would support Banks during the Red River Campaign, and they all, he wrote, "favor military operations on the Red River, provided the stage of water will enable the gun-boats to co-operate." 32

In a letter to Grant on 8 Jan, Halleck wrote:

"In regard to General Banks' campaign against Texas, it is proper to remark that it was undertaken less for military reasons than as a matter of State policy. As a

military measure simply, it perhaps presented less advantages than a movement on Mobile and the Alabama River, so as to threaten the enemy's interior lines...But, however this may have been, it was deemed necessary as a matter of political or State policy, connected with our foreign relations, and especially with France and Mexico, that our troops should occupy and hold at least a portion of Texas. The President so ordered, for reasons satisfactory to himself and his cabinet, and it was, therefore, unnecessary for us to inquire whether or not the troops could have been employed elsewhere with greater military advantage."33

Halleck also asked Grant for an "interchange of views on the...coming campaign." 34

In reply, Grant reported on 15 January that the Red River was too low for navigation and that he believed his next operation should be against Mobile, Montgomery and Atlanta.³⁵ A few days later, Grant reiterated his preference for operations to the east rather than west in a letter to Major General George Thomas, Commander of the Military Division of the Mississippi.³⁶

On 19 January, Sherman again reported that operations on the Red River would be impossible and the Mississippi around Memphis is 12 to 20 feet lower than it was at the same period the year before.³⁷ Admiral Porter wrote to Banks that he had "sent four good 'tin-clads,' light draught...I will send six more in a few days...The rebels are blockading Red River again with rafts and fortifying Shreveport strongly. The shoals at Alexandria are yet dry...It will require a rise of 12 feet for any vessel to ascend the river." Banks' personal envoy confirmed all this on 4 February.³⁹

Sherman proposed to Grant on 24 January, a coordinated "consecutive movement" with forces moving south from Arkansas, Banks' force taking Alexandria on the Red River, and Sherman with Porter going directly to Shreveport.⁴⁰ He wrote to Porter two days later to report the Red River was very low, but hoped to "clear out Red River as high as Shreveport by April" when the snow melted and the water would rise.⁴¹ A few days later to Halleck he reported he could "aid Banks, Steele, and Admiral Porter in taking Shreveport...Water is now too low, but in March and April will favor."

Banks' chief engineer wrote a long letter in late January to caution him against an operation on the Red River and its tributaries, as well as in that part of Louisiana that time of year. Some rivers may overflow their banks, lines of supply and communication would need to be established, roads would need to be repaired, there was no reliable railroad, some bridges were not in good order. He noted there were high bluffs at some points along the Red River; some were fortified. The engineer expected "our path (to be) disputed at every point...streams with high banks will afford him a favorable opportunity to retard our progress..." He also

mentioned the importance of security for the force, the need for coordinated action and much preparation. "The campaign above sketched out would, I believe, be a long one." 43

On 30 Jan, Sherman wrote two letters. To Grant he asked what his orders were regarding the Red River expedition; Banks sent a messenger stating that Sherman and Steele were to cooperate on the expedition. He also stated that any movement up the river should be dependent on Porter's ability to navigate.⁴⁴ To Porter he wrote that the Department of the Tennessee had been ordered to cooperate with Banks on the Red River expedition. Sherman recorded, "You must take the initiative, as the gun-boats must carry the heavy ordnance, and we should not engage Shreveport until you can put your gun-boats (iron-clad) into the fight." He also mentioned the "Red River should be in good boating order" by the end of February.⁴⁵

Sherman thought the Red River expedition was a good idea. He wrote: "I know if we can wipe out Shreveport as I have done Meridian you can safely call for 20,00 men from here and Arkansas in all April." He was referring to the planned move east by Grant. The next day he wrote Banks that "Red River is still low. I had a man in from Alexandria yesterday who reported the falls or rapids at that place impassable save by the smallest boats." He hoped to join Banks' forces with 10,000 men after the Meridian Campaign.

On 1 February, Halleck gave Banks a way out. He had also received the report of the Chief Engineer and saw there may be some problems operating in that part of the country. He wrote, "... the strategic advantages of this point {Shreveport} may be more than counterbalanced by disadvantages of communication and supplies." He continued, "If the Red River is not navigable (and it will require months to open any other communications to Shreveport), there seems very little prospect of the requisite co-operation or transportation of supplies. It has thereby been left entirely to your discretion, after fully investigating the question, to adopt this line or substitute any other." He also suggested if operations could not be completed in that area, Steele's command could set up to support Grant's spring campaign. Halleck feared with winter so far advanced and armies reduced due to furloughs (coupled with the news from the Chief Engineer) that "no important operations west of the Mississippi will be concluded in time for General Grant's "spring campaign."

A 5 February letter from Steele to Banks brought bad news about the roads in the area. Steele had sent several spies throughout the area and found "The roads are now in such condition that an army could not move from here...with artillery or trains, and I am told they will be impracticable for several months to come." Steele would need steamers to transport his command south if he was to make it to the Red River. 49

Responding to two letters from Banks who asked for clarifications to his orders, Halleck put the Commander, Department of the Gulf, in his place:

"If...you are waiting for orders from Washington, there must be some misapprehension...you {are} free to adopt such lines and plans of campaign as you might, after a full consideration of the subject, deem best...communicate directly with Generals Sherman and Steele, and concert with them such plans of co-operation as you might deem best under all the circumstances of the case." 50

On 15 February, Grant sent Halleck a dispatch to ask, "Is General Banks preparing an expedition to go up Red River?" Grant did not want to jeopardize his planned movement east after Sherman's Meridian Campaign. He believed Banks and Sherman would be deployed at the same time. A day later he again wrote Halleck to inform him he put a stop to Banks' requested river transportation in his department, a resource his own people would need. He also suggested that Sherman should accompany any of his forces sent in support of Banks.⁵²

Halleck replied "As soon as Sherman's present expedition is terminated (about March 1), it was understood that he and General Banks would move up Red River to meet Steele's advance against Shreveport... The time of movement would depend upon stage of water in Red River." A day later Halleck wrote that he did not order any movements for Sherman, that he requested Sherman to "communicate freely" with Banks and Steele in regard to the campaign. In another long letter discussing many topics (a sort of "pass down" letter) Halleck wrote:

"Our main efforts in the next campaign should unquestionably be made against the armies of Lee and Johnston...In regard to the operations of our Western armies I fully concur in your views, but I think the condition of affairs... west of the Mississippi River will require some modification in your plans, or at least will very much delay the operations of your proposed spring campaign." 55

It should be noted that at this time, Halleck wrote to Sherman, citing his belief that Grant would be advanced to the rank of Lieutenant General to replace him.⁵⁶

On 18 February, Grant wrote to Sherman who was on his Meridian Expedition. He regretted that any Union forces east of the Mississippi would be used for the Red River Campaign; the troops needed to rest up before the spring campaign. He continued, "Unless you go in command of the proposed expedition, I fear any troops you may send with it will be entirely lost from further service in this command. This however, is not the reason for my suggestion that you be sent; your acquaintance with the country, and otherwise fitness were the reasons."

On 21 February, a dispatch was sent to Admiral Porter describing an intercepted letter from Fort De Russy. The letter described the gun enhancements of the fort (one 9 inch gun, one 64- pounder rifled, one 30-pounder rifled, and three 24-pounders) and that two additional

32-pounders were on the way. Three Confederate gunboats were at Shreveport, and 300 men had arrived to man them, although there was not enough water on the river to get them below falls at Alexandria.⁵⁸

Admiral Porter sent his first direct communication with Banks on 26 February. He presents a bleak picture: "I am prepared... to cooperate with you any time when the water is high enough...half his {Steele's} supplies are blocked up in Arkansas River, with low water, and some of his transports sunk on snags. The prospects for high water are poor just now, but by the latter part of March we must have rains above, and there is deep snow on the mountains. I should be happy to hear from you when convenient."

On 28 February, Major General Sherman ordered the Chief Quartermaster of the Department of the Tennessee to "collect a number of steam-boats suitable for the Red River of a capacity to transport 10,000 men, with artillery, ordnance, and subsistence stores for thirty days' operations..." He also sent word to his subordinates to be ready to participate in the Red River Campaign. He then traveled down the Mississippi to coordinate with Admiral Porter, and then went on to New Orleans to confer with Banks.

The next day Sherman writes to Halleck from aboard a steamer heading south down the Mississippi:

"If Red River will admit of a similar prompt and decisive movement on Shreveport {as he had just completed in the Meridian Expedition}, I see no reason why Grant should not be re-enforced in all April with 20,000 men from this quarter. I am a little afraid that there are too many to consult. Banks, Steele, and I to act in one scheme, I'm afraid of some accident; not of feeling, for I hope such cannot be, but want of authority to compel as to time of movement to insure concurrent and contemporaneous action."

Sherman was worried about the command relationships, he was very aware that Banks out ranked him, and he believed the "Red River expedition is designed to last but thirty days." The next day he wrote to higher headquarters:

"...the condition of the facts concerning the Red River expedition being indefinite...went to New Orleans to confer with General Banks. En route I saw the admiral {Porter} and learned that he was ready and a large and effective gunboat fleet would be at the mouth of the Red River ready for action March 5...General Banks is to command in person, taking with him 17,000 of his chosen troops to move by land {to} Alexandria...Steele is to move from Little Rock on Natchitoches, and he asked of me 10,000 men in boats to ascend Red River, meeting him at Alexandria the 17th of March...Inasmuch as General Banks goes in person I could not with delicacy propose that I should command, and the scene of operations lying wholly in his department, I deemed it wisest to send A.J. Smith, and to return in time to put my army in the field in shape for the coming spring campaign."

Steele wrote to Banks at the end of February complaining that he had not anticipated moving as early as Banks wanted. He had veterans on furlough and a state election to contend with. He suggested he could "make a demonstration" instead of moving all the way to Shreveport. Sherman did not agree and told Steele "to push straight for Shreveport with all he has." Steele was also rebuffed from Halleck and Grant after he requested them to intervene. 66

On 2 March, Banks formally requested 10,000 troops with artillery and 30 days supplies from Sherman. He wanted them in Alexandria on 17 March.⁶⁷ Sherman replied he would comply and requested that the forces not go farther than Shreveport and they be detached as soon as possible, "trying to get them back... in thirty days from the time they actually enter Red River."⁶⁸ A few days later, Sherman appointed Brigadier General A.J. Smith to command the forces of the Department of the Tennessee supporting Banks.⁶⁹

On 5 March, the Mississippi Squadron under Admiral Porter was already operating in the lower portion of the Red River. His forces intercepted three 32-pounder rifled guns and set ablaze a lot of other equipment in the area. The Confederates had fortified their positions around the Red River and placed obstructions in the channel. He wrote to Sherman "The water...about 4 miles up the Red River, will not admit of the passage of our heavy boats, without which we could do nothing, and without a rise in Red River I see no prospect of getting over. All we can hope for is a rise." Porter did not pass this information to Banks.

Because of a storm, Banks' movement west towards the Red River was delayed, he believed it would be at least four days. Banks estimated it would take seven days to get to the Red River. Porter had 22 gunboats ready to start up the Red River, but the water was very low and he probably would not be able to make it to Alexandria. As late as 13 March, some Army commanders were concerned about the depth of the Red River. 73

Unknown to Banks, the Confederates already knew his plan. In a letter the first week of March, Kirby Smith and Taylor detailed instructions to subordinate commanders on how to prepare for the Union movements they had anticipated since January.⁷⁴

MOVING UP THE RIVER

The overall plan was for three converging columns, one under Banks coming from the Gulf, one under Steele advancing south from Arkansas, and another under Porter and Smith coming from the Mississippi River region north of the Red River. Banks, Porter and Smith would move up the Red River via Fort De Russy, Alexandria, Natchitoches and Grand Ecore, Pleasant Hill, Mansfield and then on to Shreveport. Steele would move south from Little Rock to Arkadelphia and southward to Shreveport. Porter's gunboats would provide artillery support.

On 12 March, Porter and Smith's forces moved up the Red River with 10,000 men embarked on various vessels. Advance parties removed heavy obstructions all along the river and the forces landed at Simsport on the 13th. From there they were to march about 30 miles to get into the rear of Fort De Russy. Upon landing, a small Confederate force was pushed out and they retreated towards Fort De Russy. On 14 March, A.J. Smith pursued the Rebels while Porter proceeded up the Red River. By 4 o'clock, Smith and Porter's forces were converging on Fort De Russy and about 5,000 enemy troops escape (to which Porter blamed Banks' late arrival), a small number were captured (about 250), as well as equipment, including 10 guns.⁷⁵ In a letter to Sherman, Porter lamented that he would rather have Sherman there, but that Smith was doing well and the army and navy were operating well together.⁷⁶ They captured Alexandria a week later.⁷⁷

Banks arrived at the mouth of the Red River on the evening of 23 March⁷⁸ and established his headquarters on 25 March at Alexandria.⁷⁹ He was at least ten days behind schedule. When he arrived, he received a dispatch from the newly appointed Lieutenant General Grant. Grant made it clear to Banks that all the armies were to work together toward a common objective. He told him to continue with the Red River Campaign, but to get A.J. Smith's troops back toward the east as soon as possible. He stipulated that even if he had to abandon the capture of Shreveport, he was to keep to the time line (30 days) outlined by Sherman. Grant also introduced the idea of a move to Mobile.⁸⁰

On 26 March, Smith, Porter, and the newly arrived elements of Banks' command left Alexandria and continued to move up the river. Some of the larger vessels were hampered by low water. The bulk of the forces arrived at Grand Ecore and Natchitoches by 4 April. A dispatch arrived from Sherman asking for the return of Smith's forces within a week. Smith received a similar dispatch: "...the period for which your forces were loaned to General Banks will have expired, viz, thirty days after you entered the Red River... I want your command right away. And you will as agreed upon, return to Vicksburg at once." Banks felt he was close enough to capturing Shreveport and he kept Smith. At this point, the Union Forces on the Red River consisted of a little over 30,000 men.

The army tried to move west (out of range of Porter's supporting artillery) toward Pleasant Hill. Some elements arrived on 7 April, and there was some skirmishing, but impassable roads hampered the rear after a heavy rainstorm. The Confederate forces under Taylor continued to be pushed away, probably as far back as Mansfield, about 15-20 miles

northwest.⁸³ The Confederates had in fact concentrated about 11,000 men and selected the edge of a clearing just south of Mansfield to await the Federal advance.

As Banks' force moved along the road on 8 April, the advancing cavalry pushed back Confederate skirmishers, but then came under heavy fire. The bulk of available Union forces (about 6,000 men) formed a line in front of the Confederates. General Taylor gave the order to advance on the Union line and the Confederates initially took heavy casualties, but moved the Union line back. More Union forces joined in the line, briefly held the Confederates, but they were outflanked on both sides, and were soon routed. Advancing Union troops covered the retreat and held off the pursuing Rebels. Even so, the Confederates, pursuing the Union back towards Pleasant Hill, actually ran into hundreds of Union wagons stranded on the narrow roads. The Union also loses artillery, small arms, and about 2,200 casualties. Confederate losses were about 1,000 men.⁸⁴

Back at Pleasant Hill, Smith's forces never even got on the road toward Mansfield and he placed his troops to cover the retreat. The rest of the routed Union army was moving back towards Natchitoches and Grand Ecore (including all those supply wagons). Fresh Confederate troops moved up on the retreating Union forces and Smith's line, but they were repulsed. The Union troops moved to Grand Ecore, crossed the Red River, and awaited Porter's fleet (which got closer to Shreveport than the land forces) to take them out of the Red River. ⁸⁵

At about this time, Lieutenant General Kirby Smith joined Taylor in the field and decided to turn Taylor's force against Steele's movement south, to further protect Shreveport. But by then, Steele's forces had already turned toward Camden, Arkansas, about ninety miles northeast from Shreveport. Kirby Smith's concentrated force compelled Steele to head back north to Little Rock.⁸⁶

Porter's boats had trouble with the level of the water, obstructions, and skirmishing against the fleet. The river continued to decline when Porter received word to start heading back to Grand Ecore and then to Alexandria. Part of the Army remained to protect the fleet, and advanced with them to Alexandria between 22 and 26 April. A heroic effort was undertaken to construct various types of partial dams along the river to raise the level of water and get several vessels over the falls. Some light skirmishing continued, but all the gunboats cleared the falls by 13 May. The Army marched to Simsport by 16 May and was considered safe from the enemy on 19 May.⁸⁷

Banks had not been reporting events as he should have been. Even Secretary of War Stanton asked others about the disposition of Banks' expedition up the Red River. Sherman also complained of little to no reliable information.

What everyone did not know was that Union forces suffered a defeat under the hand of Kirby Smith at Mansfield on 8 April and Banks retreated to Grand Ecore. Banks could not let A.J. Smith depart, and he felt he had authority from both Grant and Halleck to retain those troops as long as he needed them. The Union loss amounted to 4,00 men, 16 guns, and more than 200 wagons. ⁹⁰

In the words of Major General Taylor, "after seventy days he {the enemy} retired—defeated, dispirited, and with heavy loss—at the point where his invasion began." 91

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

After the defeat, Banks' army was broken and it would be months before a new commander would be able to make a run on Mobile as Grant and others had wanted from the beginning. Sherman had predicted, he lost forces for his spring campaign. Sherman would have to do without the services of A.J. Smith and his troops, ending up three divisions short on his right when he started his march east. Sherman would have to modify his plan of attack. The Red River Campaign was met with great defeat; Banks' mismanagement and ineptitude led to a thoroughly demoralized Army. 93

Banks was "replaced" by placing someone else over him to command the newly formed Trans-Mississippi Division; Lincoln was not ready to fire one of his political generals. But by the end of 1864, the Congress decided "to inquire into the causes of the disastrous issue to the Red River campaign, under Major General Banks." Over twenty people testify and hundreds of pages of material were entered into the record. Most of the blame pointed to Banks' incompetence, although other issues were raised.

Banks, a politically appointed general with little, if any, military training, never got the glorious victory he longed for to further his own ambitions at a run for the presidency. More importantly, his, at best, marginal performance in the field prevented better qualified generals from leading and possibly saving some Union forces.

But could it all have been prevented? Knowing what the Union leaders knew at the time, could they have turned this campaign around before it even began? The facts suggest they could have.

First, the genesis for this military campaign seems to have been a partisan political objective, both in Washington and with Banks, not supported by any significant military strategy or objectives. Powerful businessmen and politicians were pressuring Lincoln. He had to show them he was taking some action. And, it would probably have looked good if one of his political generals were successful. Too bad Halleck (and others) could not provide sound military advice

against the campaign. Additionally, Banks was thinking about a run for the White House. A prize like Shreveport, and possibly part of Texas, would be a feather in his cap for future political campaigns.

Secondly, Halleck was of little help. His "suggestions" gave conflicting guidance and he really never gave a simple order to accomplish this campaign. As the general in chief in Washington, he should have been advising the politicians and establishing a military strategy to support an accepted grand strategy. He never did any of this, and put all aspects of what he should have been doing on the inexperienced Banks to decide what to do.

Third, Banks was not qualified to plan and lead a campaign. He had never been schooled in military ways, he had been unsuccessful in the past, he had no experience coordinating forces outside his command and the experienced military people around him doubted his ability. But he was a political general, a democrat, and Lincoln needed to preserve him and his reputation at least through the November elections. But, there were others in the Western Theater who would have had a better chance at succeeding.

Sherman could have planned and executed this campaign and probably would have been successful. He had already demonstrated his skill many times: he had the military know-how, military focus and vision, the ability to rally forces, and he had worked successfully with Porter. He could have planned and executed the Red River Campaign in a more timely manner, and still had the time he needed to prepare his forces for the drive east that Grant desired. Of course, the problem was Banks' organization included Louisiana, and outranked Sherman. Sherman may have encountered the same problems with the river and roads, but he certainly would have been better at handling such problems.

Fourth, Banks' campaign planning was thoroughly inadequate. There were many letters (some confusing and contradictory) shuttled all around, but very little face to face planning. The only such planning was between Sherman and Banks—two people who were not going to be together during the campaign. If the campaign had truly been planned, many other factors would have been considered both at Banks and Halleck's levels.

There was no true grand strategy in late 1863 and early 1864. It was not until the Red River Campaign started that Grant, as the newly appointed general in chief, outlined a military strategy to, first and foremost, annihilate the fielded military forces, and as a secondary objective, everything that supported those forces. The Confederate forces in the Trans-Mississippi area were not Grant's main concern.

Even without this very important starting point though, there were other areas that were not adequately planned, or simply ignored. Geography (land and river) should have been

accounted for better and Banks should have been more aware of the limitations that were present when he started to move. His own engineer and more experienced officers knowledgeable about the terrain and river advised against the campaign at that time because of the conditions. If narrow roads were bogged down with wagons and the river was too low for navigation, routes of escape (and routes for critical supplies if there was success) were not adequate. Intelligence was weak, and what little was uncovered was ignored. The four separate forces entering the campaign (Steele, Smith, Banks, and Porter) had never trained or operated together, and the campaign commander was not strong enough to synchronize and unify their actions and overcome this.

Today's military forces would have one overall commander as a Joint Task Force (JTF) Commander, with land and naval force component commanders. Usually, these commanders would know each other and participate in various planning activities. Today, senior commanders meet often at conferences and to participate in war games or table-top planning exercises. Often, there are also command post exercises to work on the planning and reporting requirements. The JTF Commander would have all forces operating off a common plan, converging on a common objective, which would support the overall military strategy. And, commanders at all levels would receive some direction from superiors, unlike what Halleck gave Banks.

Personalities, training, awareness and competence all count when leading forces in battle. Hopefully today's forces are better lead and our campaigns are better planned than they were during the Red River Campaign. Nathaniel Banks and the other Union generals surrounding this campaign have certainly given us an example of how not to do it.

WORD COUNT = 7454

ENDNOTES

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- ² Richard Irwin, "The Capture of Port Hudson," and "The Red River Campaign" in <u>Battles and Leaders of the Civil War</u>, ed. Robert U. Johnson and Clarence C. Buel (Seacaucus, New Jersey: Castle, 1982, Reprint), Volume III, 598 and Volume IV, 345-346.
- ³ Ludwell H. Johnson, <u>Red River Campaign: Politics and Cotton in the Civil War</u> (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1958), 13.
- ⁴ United States Navy Department, <u>Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion</u> (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1894-1912; cited herein as ORN), Series II, Volume 2, 631.
- ⁵ Charles B. Boynton, <u>The History of the Navy During the Rebellion</u>, Volume I (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1870), 496-497.
- ⁶ Ezra J. Warner, <u>Generals in Blue: Lives of the Union Commanders</u> (Louisiana State University Press, 1964), 195-196.
 - ⁷ Ibid., 183-185.
- ⁸ United States War Department, <u>The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies</u> (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1880-1901; cited herein as ORA), Series I, Volume 32, Part II, 41.
 - ⁹ ORA, Series I, Volume 32, Part III, 248.
 - ¹⁰ David H. Donald, Lincoln (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 490-491.
- ¹¹ ORA, Series I, Volume 32, Part III, 13, and Ulysses S. Grant, <u>Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant</u> (New York: Konecky and Konecky, 1967), 403.
 - 12 Warner, Generals in Blue: Lives of the Union Commanders, 441-443.
 - ¹³ ORA, Series I, Volume 32, Part III, 87.
 - ¹⁴ Warner, Generals in Blue: Lives of the Union Commanders, 17-18.
 - ¹⁵ Ibid., 474.
 - ¹⁶ Ibid., 454.
- ¹⁷ Patricia L. Faust, editor, <u>Historical Times Illustrated Encyclopedia of the Civil War (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1986)</u>, 594.
 - ¹⁸ ORA, Series I, Volume 34, Part II, 818-819, 895-897.

- ¹⁹ Russell F. Weigley, <u>A Great Civil War: A Military and Political History, 1861-1865</u> (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 270-271.
- ²⁰ Ezra J. Warner, <u>Generals in Gray: Lives of the Confederate Commanders</u> (Louisiana State University Press, 1959), 1299-300.
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 - ²² ORA, Series I, Volume 26, Part I, 659 and Boynton, 497.
 - ²³ Johnson, 9-12, 14-17.
- ²⁴ ORA, Series I, Volume 26, Part I, 500, 672, 673, 815, and ORA, Series I, Volume 34, Part II, 29-30.
 - ²⁵ Ibid., 673.
- ²⁶ Raimondo Luraghi, <u>A History of the Confederate Navy</u> (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1996), 252, 272.
- ²⁷ Shelby Foote, <u>The Civil War: A Narrative Red River to Appomattox</u> (New York: Random House, 1974) 26-29.
- ²⁸ Irwin, 352 and Frank M. Flinn, <u>Campaigning with Banks in Louisiana, '63 and '64 and with Sheridan in the Shenandoah Valley in '64 and '65</u> (Boston: W.B. Clarke, 1889), 98-99.
 - ²⁹ ORA, Series I, Volume 34, Part II, 15-16.
 - ³⁰ ORA, Series I, Volume 32, Part II, 25.
 - ³¹ Ibid., 36.
 - ³² ORA, Series I, Volume 34, Part II, 41, 55.
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 - ³⁵ Ibid., 100.
 - ³⁶ Ibid., 143.
 - ³⁷ Ibid., 146.
 - ³⁸ ORA, Series I, Volume 34, Part II, 221.
 - 39 Ibid., 236
 - ⁴⁰ ORA, Series I, Volume 32, Part II, 201-202.

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- ⁴² Ibid., 260.
- ⁴³ ORA, Series I, Volume 34, Part II, 125-128.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., 270-271.
- ⁴⁵ ORA, Series I, Volume 32, Part I, 184.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid., 173.
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- ⁴⁸ Ibid., 211-212.
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- ⁵⁰ Ibid., 293-294.
- ⁵¹ ORA, Series I, Volume 32, Part II, 394.
- ⁵² lbid., 401.
- ⁵³ Ibid., 402.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid., 410.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid., 413.
- ⁵⁶ Ibid., 408.
- ⁵⁷ lbid., 425.
- ⁵⁸ ORN, Series I, Volume 25, 772-773.
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- ⁶⁰ ORA, Series I, Volume 32, Part I, 189.
- ⁶¹ ORA, Series I, Volume 32, Part II, 492.
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- ⁶⁴ Ibid., 40.
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- ⁶⁶ Ibid., 546-547, 576, 587, 603, 616.
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- ⁶⁹ Ibid., 514-516.
- ⁷⁰ Ibid., 851-852, 896.
- ⁷¹ Ibid., 502.
- ⁷² Ibid., 534, 544.
- ⁷³ ORA, Series I, Volume 32, Part III, 63.
- ⁷⁴ ORA, Series I, Volume 34, Part II, 1022-1023, 1024 and Robert L. Kerby, <u>Kirby Smith's Confederacy: The Trans-Mississippi South, 1863-1865</u> (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1972), 283-286.
 - ⁷⁵ ORN, Series I, Volume 26, 24-26.
 - ⁷⁶ ORA, Series I, Volume 34, Part II, 611.
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 - ⁸⁰ ORA, Series I, Volume 34, Part II, 610-611, and Irwin, 350.
 - ⁸¹ Irwin, 351, and Flinn, 97.
 - 82 ORA, Series I, Volume 32, Part III, 242-243.
 - 83 Irwin, 351 and Flinn, 102.
- ⁸⁴ Irwin, 353-354, Flinn, 106-109, and Frances H. Kennedy, editor, <u>The Civil War Battlefield</u> Guide (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 268-269.
 - ⁸⁵ Irwin, 354-357.
 - ⁸⁶ Irwin, 360-361 and Kerby, 311.
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⁹⁴ United States Congress, <u>Joint Committee Report on the Conduct of the War – Red River Expedition</u> (New York: Krause Reprint Company, 1977), iii.

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